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ABSTRACT

While a superintendent evaluation offers the school board protection from lawsuits and criticism from both terminated superintendents and constituents angered over the superintendent's performance and salary, it also offers encouraging praise, instructive criticism, and suggestions for overcoming shortcomings and problems. The performance appraisal system, a useful and flexible tool for superintendent evaluation, requires the board members--with the superintendent's cooperation--to identify and prioritize the superintendent's major goals before the year begins. Additionally, objectives, like goals, must be established before the evaluation period begins. The final evaluation should be in written form and should focus on how effectively the superintendent accomplished the goals and objectives agreed upon. (10 references) (KM)

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By David Peterson

Superintendents are the only school-district employees not supervised by another professional. Teachers are evaluated by principals, and principals are evaluated by superintendents. Can board members evaluate superintendents? Do superintendents need to be evaluated?

The answer to both questions is "yes." Certainly a superintendent, the district's CEO, should receive regular and formal feedback and guidance.

Board members can provide such feedback and guidance only if they proceed carefully and with their superintendent's cooperation.

Why Should Superintendents Be Evaluated?

Many school districts evaluate their superintendents for legal reasons. Some state laws require it, or it may be part of the superintendent's contract. In any event, formal assessment provides a basis for evaluating weak areas and rewarding satisfactory job performance. An evaluation offers protection from lawsuits and criticism from both terminated superintendents and constituents angered over the superintendent's performance and salary. However, at its best, evaluation is a communication process.

Evaluation has more subtle and far-reaching advantages, however. It enhances communication and clarifies the board's role. "The board can govern when it knows what its superintendent is going to do and whether it's getting done," notes the New Jersey School Boards Association (1987). Evaluation requires defining what is expected of the superintendent. It requires identifying and prioritizing the district's goals.

Effective superintendent assessment certainly benefits the superintendent. It offers encouraging praise, instructive criticism, and suggestions for overcoming shortcomings and problems.

Superintendent evaluation clarifies roles, expectations, and performance.

What Is the First Step in Superintendent Evaluation?

Boards should first create a policy describing the purpose and steps of the evaluation process.

George Redfern (1980) identifies several aspects of a solid superintendent evaluation policy. The document should explain the purpose of the evaluation and the superintendent's role in it. He also says the policy should explain how the evaluation will be conducted, assert the importance of gathering evidence rather than just opinions, and establish that superintendent evaluation is linked to district goal setting.

Indeed, long-range planning documents are an essential part of superintendent evaluation. So are the superintendent's job description and written policies defining the division of responsibilities between board members and the superintendent.

An evaluation policy is also concerned with less crucial issues. It must describe how the board will determine what to evaluate, what instrument or method it will use to evaluate, and when the evaluation's various steps will occur.

An evaluation policy, then, cannot be written hastily. It must define and explain all aspects of the evaluation process. Hence the evaluation process should not proceed until it is written.

What Should Be Evaluated?

Many school districts simply use a standard checklist form to evaluate their superintendent. This approach is quick and easy, but little else recommends it.

The performance appraisal system of superintendent evaluation is a much more useful and flexible tool. As its name implies, it is more concerned with achievements than personal characteristics. It also assumes that each district will have unique goals for its superintendent. One district may focus on improving the school's public image and funding while an adjoining one stresses revising the curriculum or negotiating a more satisfying teacher contract.

Evaluation by performance appraisal requires board members to identify and prioritize the superintendent's major goals before the year begins. It is important for both board members and the superintendent to participate fully in this process. Establishing administrative goals enables the board to assert its policy-making powers and to exercise its legal mandate to guide the overall direction of public schools. Yet superintendents possess special professional knowledge about school administration and should certainly have input over what their jobs will entail for the next year. They may also have a much more realistic idea of what can be accomplished.

Board members, then, must be careful to formulate the superintendent's goals carefully and cooperatively. "In performance appraisal," note Ronald Booth and Gerald Glaub (1978a), "the school board evaluates the superintendent's results in reaching agreed-upon goals, solving agreed-upon problems, and making agreed-upon improvements." Alienating the superintendent by unilaterally imposing a set of goals would defeat most of the evaluation processes' benefits.

Goals need not be numerous; many boards have found that three to five suffice. It is certainly not necessary to include such routine duties as report writing, unless the superintendent has been deficient in per-

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formance. Some districts that use the performance appraisal system choose to include some of the superintendent's personal traits, particularly ones that have interfered with accomplishing important goals in the past.

How Can the Superintendent's Performance Be Measured?

Goals are often general, slippery statements that are hard to define precisely. For example, what does it mean to "improve relations with the local media"? Carefully formulated objectives answer such questions. They define, often with statistical precision, what constitutes success.

Objectives, like goals, should be established before the evaluation period begins. "The board," write Booth and Glaub (1978b), "knows what it is looking for before it starts to evaluate." Carefully written objectives ensure that the superintendent and board know, in some detail, what is expected of the superintendent.

To use the above example, a variety of particular objectives could measure how effectively the superintendent relates to parents. The superintendent's objectives for that goal could include attending at least eight PTA meetings, establishing forums at each school where parents can discuss their concerns with administrators, and so forth. As in formulating goals, the board should listen closely to its superintendent to ensure that objectives are reasonable. Indeed, many boards rely heavily on their superintendents' education and experience to establish precise, measurable objectives.

Yet even carefully written objectives cannot transform the evaluation process from an art into a science. Board members must be sensitive to the fact that worthy objectives can be accomplished in unethical and damaging ways and that not all performance—good or bad—can be quantified.

How Should the Evaluation Be Presented?

The evaluation process culminates in a meeting of the superintendent and board, but much work should precede that meeting.

Richard Dittloff (1982) recommends that boards meet quarterly with their superintendent to discuss progress on meeting goals and objectives. The superintendent may, particularly at such times, request changes in the goals and objectives. Some objectives may be unrealistic or may not be having their intended effect. The board should not, however, quickly agree to rewrite or discard the superintendent's objectives.

A preappraisal meeting should occur about a month before the final appraisal meeting. At the first meeting the superintendent can present a detailed self-appraisal and respond to board members' questions and concerns. Board members can then compile a final evaluation, combining the superintendent's self-appraisal with their own impressions.

The final evaluation should be in written form, though it may also be presented orally. It should, of course, focus on how effectively the superintendent accomplished the goals and objectives the board and superintendent agreed on nearly a year before. Both praise and criticism should be moderate, and the latter should be accompanied with suggestions for how to improve.

As in all aspects of the evaluative process, the superintendent should be an integral part of this meeting. Some boards elect to let their superintendent lead this final discussion since self-evaluation is usually the most enlightening.

The meeting should quickly be followed by one that sets goals for the next year. Evaluation, like planning, has stages but not a true beginning or end.

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